

VZCZCXRO3450
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DE RUEHHI #1276/01 3230932
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8748
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 5309

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 001276

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS and DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: Religious Freedom Update - Central Highlands and Danang

Ref A) 07 HCMC 811

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Christians in the Central Highlands' Gia Lai province celebrated 65 years of Protestantism, and over 20,000 faithful thronged to the two-day celebration outside of Pleiku. Evangelical Church of Vietnam South (SECV) President Truong highlighted the warming of relations between Protestants and provincial officials. In neighboring Dak Lak, the People's Committee Chairman invited the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) to provide training in the province while provincial officials have already trained more than 7,000, provincial, local and church officials on Vietnam's legal framework on religions. In Danang, SECV and United World Mission Church (UWMC) officials relayed the growth of Protestantism in the area and praised local officials for their openness. With the direct assistance of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, UWMC has expanded pastoral training, which is allowing it to establish many new congregations and move forward in constructing a new headquarters. Unfortunately, some problems remain for unrecognized house churches in Danang. The United Baptist Church has been denied local registration and the head of the local congregation has experienced harassment due to the fact that the United Baptist Church has not yet been nationally recognized. END SUMMARY.

20,000+ Protestants Celebrate in Central Highlands

¶2. (SBU) In a large-scale show of faith, over 20,000 ethnic minority Protestants gathered at Pastor Siu Y Kim's Plei Breng Church outside of Pleiku to celebrate 65 Years of Protestantism in Gia Lai Province on October 15 and 16. Poloff joined the two-day program, which brought together believers and government officials from throughout the province. The Provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman addressed the faithful at the celebration, as did the entire leadership of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam South (SECV). Several minority choirs, one with over 450 vocalists, performed moving renditions of well-known Protestant hymns in their own language.

¶3. (SBU) Poloff joined Pastor Kim and SECV President Thai Phuoc Truong for lunch following the morning's opening session. President Truong noted the historic nature of the celebration and commented that he had never before seen so many Protestants in one place. He said that relations between the SECV and provincial leaders had warmed considerably and that Pastor Kim had been the source of the improved situation. President Truong also highlighted Pastor Kim's rising star status by noting his recent election to the executive committee of the SECV.

¶4. (SBU) In a rare occurrence, state-run Vietnam Television's nightly news program, watched by an estimated 25 million Vietnamese, spent two and a half minutes reporting on the celebration. The following day, the same news program spent two minutes covering IGE's visit to the Central Highlands and its meetings with officials in Dak Lak and Gia Lai to talk about religious freedom issues.

¶5. (SBU) Poloff also traveled to an outlying Presbyterian

congregation about 65 kilometers outside of Pleiku in Ia Poong commune, Chu Prong district. Pastor Cao, lead pastor of the small congregation, said that the congregation is almost exclusively comprised of minority believers. Cao has built a small chapel on his private land to provide a worship center for his 93 followers. He said that over the past four years attendance at his services has increased slightly.

16. (SBU) According to the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee, Gia Lai Province has nearly 300,000 religious adherents. He stated that there are 91,000 Catholics, 86,000 Buddhists and 78,000 Protestants. He also said that there are 10 main ethnic minority Protestant pastors, which include four from the Jarai ethnic minority and six from Bahnar ethnic minority.

17. (SBU) News reports on IGE's Dak Lak visit affirmed that the province has 1.8 million religious adherents divided between Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and the Cao Dai sect. Protestants make up approximately 340,000. Recently, Dak Lak Province has held 37 training courses, in cooperation with CRA, for approximately 7,000 provincial, local and religious officials on the GVN legal framework on religion, according to news reports. Dr. Chris Seiple, IGE President, also noted that Dak Lak officials invited IGE to provide further training for provincial and local officials on Vietnam's religious laws and policies and said he took this as a very welcome sign.

Danang Sees the Light

18. (SBU) Poloff visited the headquarters of the United World Mission Church (UWMC) in Danang and met with its President, Rev. Nguyen Toi.

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Pastor Toi relayed the many hardships he and his followers had experienced since the fall of the South in 1975, but heralded the progress made in the past several years. He noted that his church was registered in 2006 and formally recognized in October 2007, even though a large majority of its congregations are located in the Central Highlands. He said that currently the UWMC has 202 congregations with 23,000 followers. He said that the only thing hindering the creation of more congregations is the church's limited ability to train more lay pastors. (ref A)

19. (SBU) Pastor Toi praised the CRA for approaching him last year offering to assist in establishing a training program for new pastors. Since then, over 100 pastors have been trained and 79 others are currently participating in the five-month program. Toi highlighted that five of the 11 members of the UWMC's national executive committee had been trained in this program. Toi noted that pastors in the UWMC are unpaid and that the reason the course lasts five months is to allow several two-week breaks for the men to return home to their farms. Upon the completion of the most recent round of training, UWMC plans to open dozens of new congregations, Toi said.

110. (SBU) UWMC is also moving forward in planning for a new headquarters which it hopes will house up to 1,500 people. Toi noted that the government would not charge the church for the land and that he was in the process of raising funds, primarily overseas, for the construction of the new facility that would include a school and dormitory. Toi said that while his followers were impoverished he expected each to donate 10,000 VND (approximately \$0.60). Toi said that a Protestant organization in Virginia affiliated with his church had already constructed 50-60 prayer houses at the cost of 80-90 million VND per church (approximately \$4,700 - \$5,400).

111. (SBU) Poloff also visited with Pastor Hiep, the head of the SECV in Danang, at his newly built Hoa My church, a resplendent structure that seats more than 600 and was constructed with financial assistance from South Korean Protestants, Hiep said. Hiep's congregation numbers more than 1,000 and also runs a number of social service programs to assist the community. Pastor Hiep praised local Danang officials and Danang City Communist Party Secretary in particular for being forward leaning on religious freedom issues and allowing a Christmas program at the city's

largest public auditorium for more than 2,000.

¶12. (SBU) He also provided Poloff with two proselytizing tracts that church members distribute to friends. While the law prohibits direct missionary work, Hiep said that he is able to work within the law by having congregants offer the tracts to friends and family as gifts. His goal is to have each member bring a friend into the church each year. In order to facilitate further missionary work, the church has constructed a "reading room" which serves as a small-scale library for the surrounding community that also has a large amount of religious material available for free.

"Lions are Still Lions"

¶13. (SBU) Referring to the Biblical story of Daniel and the Lion's Den, Pastor Hiep observed that God did not transform Daniel but instead closed the mouth of the lions. That said, lions are still lions Hiep affirmed. Comparing the lions to the GVN, he stated that Protestants have been protected by God and are allowed to "pet the lion" but they must still treat the lion well. Pastor Hiep's complained that the GVN had yet to return land previously owned by the SECV and other churches in Vietnam prior to the fall of the South in 1975.

¶14. (SBU) Despite praise for local officials in Danang, the United Baptist Church continues to experience harassment, according to Pastor Nguyen Chi Huong. Poloff raised the case of the United Baptists and Pastor Huong with local officials, who responded that since the United Baptist Church was not recognized nationally it could not be recognized locally and as such religious services were not allowed. Poloff pointed out that the legal framework on religions allows local congregations not yet recognized nationally to register, and observed that according to the law national recognition was not possible without prior local recognition.

¶15. (SBU) Local officials stressed their belief that Huong was not a "true pastor" because the United Baptist Church does not have authority to grant him the title. Poloff noted that Pastor Huong had completed formal pastoral training and that as such he should be viewed as the leader of his congregation. Local officials discouraged Poloff from meeting with Pastor Huong directly and later that day, despite assurances from the previous evening, Huong cancelled his meeting with Poloff due to a problem with high blood pressure which resulted in checking himself into the hospital. (Note: We have since talked with Pastor Huong and he has assured us that he is well, but that his small congregation continues to

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experience difficulties.)

Comment: Government Showcases Acceptance of Religion

¶16. (SBU) While the actions of a few local officials continue to raise concerns, the willingness of national and provincial officials to allow a large-scale religious event in the heart of the Central Highlands and to assist in the training of pastors and local officials shows the steady progress of the GVN on religious freedom issues. Until the last few years, Protestant leaders and their congregations in the center of Vietnam were widely viewed with suspicion for suspected separatist sympathies. The fact that this time the central government chose to showcase these religious events on its premier national newscast also evidences further acceptance of Protestantism in the region.

¶17. This cable was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City.

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